

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON DC - On Thursday, militants bombed the Sufi Data Darbar shrine in Lahore, Pakistan, killing at least 40 and wounding hundreds. The shrine holds the remains of a Persian Sufi saint, Abul Hassan Ali Hajvery, important to the Barelvi sect of Islam.

"The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) condemns this barbarous act of violence and extends its condolences to the families of the deceased," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "This tragedy is one more painful piece of evidence that the Pakistani government must do more to protect the lives and freedoms of all religious groups, both from the majority and minority faith communities."

This is the second significant attack on religious sites in Lahore in recent weeks. On May 28, gunmen attacked two mosques belonging to the Ahmadi community in Lahore during Friday prayers. The attackers seized worshipers and battled security forces, with scores killed.

"USCIRF reiterates its call for the United States to vigorously press Islamabad to repeal Pakistan's blasphemy law, which creates a climate of impunity for extremist violence," said Mr. Leo. "USCIRF calls for tolerance and a prompt and effective investigation into this incident, followed by bringing those responsible to justice."

USCIRF has documented systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion in Pakistan for several years. Sectarian and religiously-motivated violence is chronic, and the government has failed to protect members of religious minorities from such violence and to bring perpetrators to justice. Religiously discriminatory legislation fosters an atmosphere of intolerance in the country and emboldens extremists.

The USCIRF 2010 Annual Report recommends, among other policies, that the U.S. government urges the government of Pakistan to set national textbook and curricula standards that actively promote tolerance towards all religions, move quickly to implement those standards, and provide oversight of madrassas in order to ensure the absence of intolerance and incitement to violence in education.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at

tcarter@uscirf.gov or (202) 523-3257